

## the price of normal by queerio\_gaymer

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**Summary:**

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Nancy’s brow raises. “You mean about telling me to fuck off?”

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Replacing Jonathan with Jessica. A drabble to explore Jessica Byer's character.

## the price of normal

### Author's Note:

I had this idea of genderbending (replacing??) Jonathan since watching the second season, so I thought I'd put this here and see if anyone else is interested. I was thinking of doing a season 1 rewrite. Lemme know what you think :)

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Ok, I started a full-on Jessica Byers AU, so if you do like this, you can check that out too!

Jessica Byers is the responsible one of the family, circa the time her asshole father picked up and left. She cooks, she takes her little brother Will to and from school, reminds her mom to get lunch when she's at work (and then hands her a brown paper bag with a sandwich, because she's not sure her mom would actually *eat* otherwise). If she goes out, she leaves a note - always.

She's the responsible one, because that's what her family needs her to be. Her mother works herself too hard, and her brother is a baby (or at least the same size as one, but Jessica never teases him about it - the poor kid is sensitive, about his height and almost everything else). On the days where Jessica feels like she's drawn the short straw, she just glances at the dark bags under her mother's eyes, and she knows that the arrows and slings of responsibility are small prices to pay.

Some days, though, the sharp claws of resentment hook themselves in her mind, and she can't help but think, *one of these days it's going to be too much.*

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Jessica's knuckles turn white as her grip tightens around the steering wheel. She checks the clock, for the third time in the past minute, and it tells her the same time it did the time before, and the time before.

Late. By ten minutes, though, which means if she drives fast, she might be able to just barely get Will to school on time. Maybe.

That means Jessica is screwed, though. She tries to tell herself it doesn't matter - *it's just a few minutes of home room* - and then, feeling bad, veers 180 and tells herself it does. So. She has her bases covered.

Will, being the good kid he is, senses her stress and frowns, his expression drawn. "I'm sorry. I made us late."

"Don't be," Jessica replies distractedly, slowing down for a stop sign. "Ketchup stains are so last season, you definitely needed to change." She shoots him a grin and a wink, for good measure. "Besides, this just gives us more time to listen to our tunes."

She turns on the radio and Journey fills the car. Will smiles, bouncing in his seat as he hums along to "Seperate Ways." His excitement is infectious, and some of Jessica's nerves quiet down.

They rev right back up when she presses her foot to the gas pedal and the engine splutters, the car rolling slowly into the middle of the intersection.

“Oh, no. No, no, no.” The car has just enough power to make it to the other side, and Jessica guides it to the shoulder. She puts it in park, taking the keys out and (her and Will holding their breath) tries restarting it.

Nothing.

“Fu- crap. *Crap.* ” Jessica rests her head against the steering wheel, taking a deep breath, and then another.

“What are we going to do?” Will asks quietly, after a moment.

Jessica sighs, and pops the trunk. “We’re going to upgrade our ride,” she says, in what she hopes is a convincingly confident voice.

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Jessica tries to maintain an image. She’s smart *enough*, cool *enough*, polite *enough*, casual *enough*, and so on, ad nauseum. It took her awhile to get the hang of, at first, but she’s pushed and pulled and fitted herself into a prototypical adolescent average. No one questions the average, no one sees it as out of place or odd. It’s normal, and *goddamn*, the Byers family needs normal.

It’s just, lately...the image has been harder and harder for her to hold on to. It’s distorting, bending and cracking under the force she’s putting on it.

Because, big fucking surprise, Jessica Byers is not “normal.”

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Will ends up forty-five minutes late to school, an exasperated but charitable neighbor agrees to tow the car back to the Byers' house, and Jessica is pretty sure she's due for a heart attack any minute.

She walks her bike over to one of the school's bike stand. She doesn't have a lock, but somehow she's pretty sure no one would steal it, regardless. For one, it's her bike from middle school, so most her classmates have outgrown it, including her. And for two, the brakes are so worn down that it's more accurate to call them speed dampeners, and that's being generous. But that had been their saving grace - she'd stowed the bike in the trunk of the car planning to get it fixed eventually.

Jessica leans against the brick wall of Hawkins High School, trying to catch her breath. Her t-shirt feels sticky with sweat, but luckily it's dark, so hopefully no one will notice. Some of the rips on her jeans might be a little bigger, and they'd come unpegged. Jessica bent and rolled the cuffs up hastily. That'd have to be good enough, unless she wanted to miss even more of her History class.

She leans her head back, looking up at the wisps of clouds overhead. She can always skip, just for the rest of first period. No one would notice she's gone. Jessica hates how her heart thuds painfully in her chest at the thought. She is unremarkable, unnoticeable, by her own design. It's easier. It's safer. It also, sometimes, sucks.

Jessica shakes her head, pushing herself off the wall and out of her self-pitying bullshit. Time to face the music.

She keeps her head down as she makes her way to class. Tyler from her band class is roaming the halls, a pass rolled up and sticking out behind his ear. His eyes light up when he sees her, and he waves with gusto. Jessica returns it half-heartedly, grateful that her class is near so that she can “apologetically” duck away from him. He’s a decent guy and a nice friend, but the way he’s taken to smiling at her recently makes her palms sweat.

Jessica takes a nervous breath and opens the door as quietly as she can. Just her luck, the door is in the front of the classroom, and as she steps in and closes it, she can *feel* everyone’s eyes on her back.

She turns around with a wide, sheepish smile. Mr. Collins is sitting in his stool next to the overhead, and he raises a bushy brow at her, unamused.

“I’m so - ” *Sorry* is on the tip of her tongue, but he puts a hand up, and the word shrivels, turns sour in her mouth.

He levels her with a stare that has her standing there uncomfortably in the center of attention. It’s meant to shame her, but her default state is ashamed, so all she really feels is awkward. As the seconds tick by, a flare of indignation unfurls in her stomach.

Finally, with a dismissive wave of his hand, he says simply, “You’re late, Ms. Byers.”

Jessica takes it as her cue to find her seat, eyes on her scuffed high tops.

“Just like the Americans were late in joining the First World War...” Mr. Collins continues on with his lecture, his tone monotonous now that he wasn’t publicly castigating a student.

She notices the small smirk on the face of the girl who sits behind her. Nancy Wheeler, one of the few in the room studious (nerdy) enough to appreciate the joke that was made at Jessica’s expense. Nancy Wheeler, the wallflower, who is so *normal* that it’s almost like they inhabit different planes.

Seeing the other girl’s smirk sets something in Jessica’s chest to aching. It’s a stupid reaction, Jessica knows, to allow herself to be hurt by someone she barely even knows, just because Nancy is --

Jessica grits her teeth and kills that line of thought where it stands.

“Oh, fuck off, Wheeler,” she mutters under her breath, slipping into her seat. She’s angry with herself, angry with this whole clusterfuck of a day, but she forces out a shaky breath and tamps down on the feeling.

Jessica turns to grab her notebook out of her bookbag, and she catches a glimpse of Nancy’s face. The brunette is glaring at her, lips drawn in a thin line. *Shit*, Jessica thinks, her stomach sinking. Apparently that hadn’t been as quiet as she’d meant it to be.

She's about to try for her second sorry of the day, but Nancy pointedly looks down at her notes, ignoring Jessica. So Jessica, the needle of a headache pricking behind her eyes, pulls out her notebook and searches her bag for a pencil.

And, just her luck, cannot for the life of her find one.

Jessica resigns herself to just listen. She probably deserves this, cosmically or whatever.

There's a gentle tap on her shoulder. She turns to see Nancy holding out a pencil, brows arched. Jessica's forehead creases in confusion, and she eyes Nancy cautiously. The other girl's features are still edged with a shade of harshness, jaw clenched.

Nancy rolls her eyes at the taller girl's hesitation. "Just take the pencil, *Byers*, " she drawls, emphasizing Jessica's last name meaningfully. Then she tilts her head thoughtfully. "Unless you'd rather I, how'd you put it..."

"No," Jessica cuts the other girl off quickly, cheeks flushing. She's pretty sure the world would turn upside down if straight-edge Nancy Wheeler dropped the f-bomb.

Nancy smirks again, but this one - this one Jessica likes. It's crooked, closer to a smile, and Nancy's blue eyes twinkle with the flicker of a fire Jessica was surprised to find.



Jessica catches herself, averting her gaze. She feels...unmoored, somehow, and it's unsettling, so she guides herself back to safer waters, retreats inwards.

Nancy spins the pencil between her thumb and index finger, and Jessica reaches out and takes it carefully.

"Thanks," she says, and it feels clipped, like it's a word someone else put in her mouth. Jessica clears her throat lightly and tries again. "And...sorry, about...before." A fumbling attempt if she's ever heard one, but yes, those are definitely her own, pathetic words.

Nancy's brow raises. "You mean about telling me to fuck off?"

The world might not turn upside down, but Jessica's stomach flips at hearing the curse fall so easily off the other girl's tongue. Her eyes, of their own accord, drop down to Nancy's lips, as if she expects to find them stained.

Nancy grins, tells her not to worry about it and to keep the pencil, and for the rest of the period, Jessica keeps her attention firmly on the overhead. But her mind keeps flashing back to Nancy's smirk, Nancy's grin, Nancy's eyes.

It's not *normal*, this pull that the other girl has on her. It's odd. It's *queer*. It's so far removed from the image Jessica Byers needs to be that it's not even in the frame.

So, when the bell rings and everyone is packing their things away, Jessica wordlessly hands a confused Nancy back her pencil. And she walks away.

Because Jessica Byers might not be normal, but goddammit, she's going to try to be.